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Flexibility in Ontario Secondary School Programs



Are you puzzled by the variety of courses being offered in the secondary school your son or daughter attends? Do you wonder what courses like Family Studies or Informatics are all about, and what earning credits really means?

High school education is different from the way it used to be—so different that many parents, like yourself, may wonder whether their youngsters are learning the right things—or learning enough

You needn't worry. Our secondary schools are still teaching all the basic skills that young people require. Subjects like English, History, Science, and Mathematics are still being offered in every high school in Ontario. But the new courses that are available to today's students are also important.

Why? Consider this question. Could the high school education we received adequately prepare our sons and daughters for tomorrow's world?

The kind of education we received may have been fine for the times. But times change; the world changes. Many of today's students will be working at jobs that didn't even exist when you and I went to high school. And because modern technology and communications have made the world so much smaller, they'll be exposed to people and situations that we seldom, if ever, had to face.

That's one reason for the changes that have taken place in our secondary schools during the past few years, and why the requirements for earning a diploma are different as well. The new system is more flexible. It allows students to choose from a greater variety of courses than ever before, and to learn things they'll need to know in order to live and work successfully in tomorrow's world. Their world.

There's another important reason for the changes No two people are exactly alike. We don't all learn in the same way or at the same speed. The old system didn't always take this into account. When you and I went to high school many students failed a grade because they couldn't pass one subject, even though their work in other subjects was acceptable.

The new system is helping to change all that.

How does it work?

The credit system allows students to study at their own speed and to choose subjects that will best prepare them for the kind of life and career they want to follow when they graduate.

In today's secondary schools, each course that a student takes is worth a certain number of points, or

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credits. A full credit is given for most courses, but some may be valued at more or less than one credit, depending on the amount of work they represent.

When a student has successfully completed courses that are worth a minimum of 27 credits, he or she will receive a Secondary School Graduation Diploma. Most students earn seven or eight credits a year, and their diploma in four years.

To earn an Honour Graduation Diploma, which is needed to get into most universities, a student is required to complete six honour level or Year 5 courses. Most students earn these additional credits during their fifth year in a secondary school, but it's possible to earn some of them earlier.

In any case, the amount of time it takes to earn credits isn't the most important consideration.

A credit is awarded when a student successfully completes a course that would normally require between 110 and 120 hours of classroom study. If the work is done successfully in less time, the school principal may award the credit early. But a student who needs more time to do the work successfully can still earn the credit. The important thing is completing the work satisfactorily—not how long it takes to do it

Who decides which subjects a student will take? Students and their parents do, because they are in the best position to judge what programs should be taken in light of the individual's abilities, interests and goals. But there are some requirements.

All secondary school courses are now grouped in four major categories: Communications, Social and Environmental Studies, Pure and Applied Sciences, and Arts. Every student must earn at least three credits in each of these categories to obtain a Secondary School Graduation Diploma.

There's a good reason for this regulation. It's to make sure that every student receives a well-rounded education, and that all of the basics are covered.

There is one other requirement for students who began their secondary school programs after September, 1974. Four credits in English Studies and two credits in Canadian Studies must also be included among the 27 credits required for the diploma.

But within these major areas of study, there are many individual courses to choose from. These are the choices that enable a student to tailor his or her

educational program to fit individual interests and goals.

How do you make the best choice of subjects? Talking with teachers, principals, and guidance counsellors is one good way. Even though the choice of individual subjects is up to parents and students, teachers and principals have an obligation to offer advice on the combination of subjects that will best prepare their students to meet individual

Most schools also make this kind of information available in school calendars or special brochures. Students and parents should study these recommendations carefully, because it is their responsibility to make the final choices.

Won't most students avoid the traditional subjects under the new system?

Not at all. Experience has proven that subjects like Mathematics actually attract more students than they used to, and that others, like Geography, are attracting almost as many. Most students make sound and responsible choices based on personal career goals and the advice of teachers and parents.

What it adds up to

The new system is different from the kind of high school education you and I remember—but that is how it should be. The world is different

The most important thing we can give today's young people is an open approach to learning. We must show them how to learn so they can cope with change. We must continue to give them the basic skills they will need, but we must also broaden their horizons and insights. Finally, we must encourage them to make the most of their individual strengths and capabilities.

The new system is helping to do just that.

Regional offices of the Ontario Ministry of Education are located in the following cities:

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